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ABSTRACT

When Charles S. Johnson was president of Fisk University, he used the university's art collection as a tool for the advancement of the university and as a major part of an environment that nurtured intellectuals and leaders in the African American community. This historical study used interviews and secondary sources to focus on the value of art as a way to enlarge the scope of the Fisk curriculum and a means to build the identity of students. Johnson arrived at Fisk with an understanding of how art can change minds that he had developed during his years in New York as a promoter of African American art and literature during the Harlem Renaissance. In 1928, Johnson moved to Nashville, Tennessee to assume a position at Fisk University, and in 1946 he was chosen as the first black president at Fisk. Visual art was an important component of his program to develop Fisk, and his most impressive achievement was the acquisition of the Alfred Stieglitz collection from his widow, Georgia O'Keeffe, which was arranged through another Harlem Renaissance facilitator, Carl Van Vechten. This collection gave Fisk an enormously important asset that other universities in the South lacked. Through his promotion of the art collection of the university, Charles S. Johnson not only fostered racial integration but integration in the sense of breaking down barriers between disciplines. (Contains 50 footnotes.) (SLD)

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Modern Art in the Old South:
The Role of Fisk University's Avant-garde Art Collection in Campus Curriculum

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> ...that it may show that there are many ways of seeing and thinking, and possibly through showing that there are many ways, give some one confidence in his own way, which may be different, whatever its direction.[1]

These were the words used by Georgia O'Keeffe in 1949 when she donated 101 art works from the collection of her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, to Fisk University in Nashville Tennessee. She had chosen the prominent historically black college because unlike most other institutions in the South during the late 1940s, Fisk offered an environment in which people of all races could view the work.[2] The remainder of the collection had been divided between four of the nation's most distinguished museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art. Included in this collection were works still considered to be "radical" by many Americans: Cubist paintings by Picasso and Braque, abstractions by Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley, and photographs of light and atmosphere by Stieglitz himself. At the time of the bequest, it had been only 36 years since the famous Armory Show that introduced Americans to Modern art, and while abstract expressionism was in full swing in New York, other parts of the country had a markedly different attitude toward this new art. The donation of this collection was one of numerous steps taken by Fisk president Charles S. Johnson to create an atmosphere on the campus that was "far

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[1] Georgia O'Keeffe quoted in Richard J. Powell and Jock Reynolds. *To Conserve a Legacy. American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999):128.

[2] Kevin Grogan, "Fisk University Galleries and Collections," in Powell and Reynolds. *To Conserve a Legacy*: 20-21.

more accepting of progressive ideas and modernist impulses than … other institutions in the South."[3]

President Johnson encouraged integration both in the racial sense and in the sense of breaking down barriers between academic disciplines. In doing so, he was anticipating later ideas about how best to foster learning and intellectual curiosity, in particular, the theory of integrated learning. Johnson built a campus in which English majors attended art exhibitions; students in the sciences attended lectures on colonial imperialism; and sociolog` majors took in screenings of foreign and avant-garde film. And in doing so, he created an environment that nurtured future intellectuals and leaders among the African American community.[4]

Purpose

What led Johnson to adopt this approach to learning at Fisk? This paper will examine Johnson's understanding of art as a tool for advancement, developed during his years as a promoter of African American art and literature during the Harlem Renaissance.[5] It will explore

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[3] Powell and Reynolds. *To Conserve a Legacy*: 128.

[4] Heidi H. Jacobs. "The Teacher as Designer: Integrating the Curriculum." *International Schools Journal.* V18, n1 (1998): 22-33. Heidi H. Jacobs. "The Interdisciplinary Concept Model: Theory and Practice." *Gifted Child Quarterly.* V30, n4 (1986): 159-163. Cynthia Ann Bickley-Green. "Math and Art Curriculum Integration: A Post-Modern Foundation." *Studies in Art Education. A Journal of Issues and Research.* V37, n1 (1995): 6-18. Heidi H. Jacobs. *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation.* (Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989).

[5] David Levering Lewis. *When Harlem Was in Vogue.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). Patrick J. Gilpin. "Charles S. Johnson. An Intellectual Biography," Unpublished Dissertation

the ways in which Fisk's art collection was used and its effect on students and campus life. It will show the value of art – not just as a tool for teaching studio and art history classes – but as a way to enlarge the scope of the curriculum as a whole. In particular, the paper will demonstrate the unique role of black college art collections in building a sense of identity among students and expanding the worldview of all races.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is historical inquiry. Our primary sources included items drawn from the papers of Charles S. Johnson and the art collection at Fisk University including the famed Stieglitz bequest. Interviews with Johnson's colleagues, former students, and administrators were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the history of the collection and its use over the years, particularly during Johnson's administration. Secondary sources were drawn from the areas of history, African American education, curriculum integration theory, and twentieth century art history. The authors would like to note that although the approach of this paper is historical, it also makes connections to and recommendations for the current situation.

Charles S. Johnson: Harlem Renaissance Promoter

Johnson arrived at Fisk with an understanding of how art could change minds. A sociologist by training, Johnson had spent the greater part of the 1920s bringing young black artists and intellectuals to the attention of the white vanguard in New York. Originally hired as a researcher for the National Urban League, he had come to New York in 1921 to edit the organization's publication *Opportunity*, which he quickly turned into a showcase for black literary talent and art. Among the contributors to *Opportunity* were poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, writers James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston, and artists Aaron

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(Vanderbilt University, 1973). Richard Robbins. *Sidelines Activist. Charles S. Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. (Oxford, Mississippi: University of Mississippi, 1996).

Douglas and Richmond Barthé.[6] Historian David Levering Lewis places Johnson among the most important of "The Six"[7] facilitators of the Renaissance. He cites testimonials from Hughes, Hurston, Douglas and poet Arna Bontemps that proclaimed Johnson as the individual who did more to encourage the arts during the 1920s than anyone else.[8] For example, Aaron Douglas said of Johnson, "His subtle sort of scheming mind had arrived at the feeling that literature was a soft spot of the arts; it represented a soft spot in the armor of the nation, and he set out to exploit it." This strategy would become a cornerstone of Johnson's approach, not only in New York but during his later years as president of Fisk University. Blyden Jackson, a Fisk colleague of Johnson's, portrays the Renaissance as a stage on which Johnson thought that "America [would be] utterly emancipated from the color caste." Jackson points to a dinner hosted by Charles Johnson at the Civic Club in New York on March 21, 1924 as his most significant contribution to the Renaissance: "It was a dinner at the 'white' Civic Club, one of the very few places in downtown Manhattan where an interracial group, be it ever so elite, in the 1920s could have broken bread together undisturbed." Johnson invited over three hundred people—white and black—who identified themselves with the Renaissance. The guests included Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. Du Bois, Carl Van Vechten, and Albert Barnes. Before the dinner many black writers and poets had to entrust their manuscripts to

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[6] Gilpin, "Charles S. Johnson. An Intellectual Biography." Patrick J. Gilpin. "Charles S. Johnson: Entrepreneur of the Harlem Renaissance." In *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, edited by A. Bontemps. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972).

[7] The Six refers to Jessie Redmon Fauset, Walter White, Alain Locke, Caspar Holstein, and James Weldon Johnson.

[8] Lewis. *When Harlem was in Vogue.*

unscrupulous agents, but with the success of the evening came interest from prominent American publishers.[9]

According to Ralph Pearson, "Johnson sought to alter the self-image of many blacks not with demands or accusations that would further alienate the races, but with ideas and programs that were achievable within the racial atmosphere of the 1920s."[10] His identification of the arts as a "soft spot in the armor of the nation" was correct: the Harlem Renaissance went a long way toward changing the image of blacks in the United States, helping many to move to the forefront of American life. Thus Johnson, a sociologist, had a keen awareness of the fact that political change was tied up with culture.

Charles S. Johnson: Fisk University President

Near the close of the Renaissance in 1928, Charles S. Johnson moved to Nashville, Tennessee to assume the position of chair of the newly formed social science department at Fisk. Under Johnson's leadership, the department quickly gained a national reputation – most considered it an equal to Howard Odum's department at the University of North Carolina. Through his influence and Harlem Renaissance ties, he was able to attract an impressive array of intellectual luminaries to the campus. Among his accomplishments was the establishment of the Race Relations Institute, which provided a venue for the discussion of issues pertaining to race, poverty, and social justice. Participants included a cross-section of the nation's leaders–church representatives, labor organizers, government officials, academics and community organizers.

When the time came to select Fisk's first black president, Johnson's name stood out as a strong choice. In spite of opposition by some alumni, who found his connections to white

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[9] Blyden Jackson. "A Postlude to a Renaissance." *Southern Review* v26, n4 (1990): 746-765.

[10] Ralph Pearson. "Combating Racism with Art: Charles S. Johnson and the Harlem Renaissance." *American Studies* v18, n1 (1977): 123-134.

philanthropy suspect, he was chosen for the position in 1946. Ironically, it may have been these very connections that secured the presidency for Johnson. Fisk was in desperate need of someone to lead them in an endowment campaign and the board of trustees recognized that Johnson was the only person on the short list of candidates who could do the job.[11]

Immediately, he began to build the campus both in terms of infrastructure and curriculum. He hoped to bring the campus at large to the same level of prominence that he had the social science department. Chief among his goals was to create an environment that would broaden the horizons of young African Americans. To accomplish this within the segregated South, he fashioned an educational program that provided the benefits of integration through its guest speakers, top-notch faculty, and co-curricular activities. According to one of these students, Jane Fort,

> During Dr. Johnson's presidency, the campus burst with intellectual activity: the faculty was full of well-trained professors, the best in their fields. ... During my years, we heard from and had an opportunity to meet and interact with such notables as W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Langston Hughes and so many others that we may have taken it all too much for granted.[12]

Visual art was an important component of Johnson's program. Earlier, he had convinced his Harlem Renaissance friend Aaron Douglas to come to the campus as chair of the art department. But Johnson's most impressive achievement in this area was undoubtedly the acquisition of the Alfred Stieglitz collection, which was arranged through another Harlem Renaissance facilitator, Carl Van Vechten. A friend of Georgia O'Keeffe, Van Vechten was instrumental in convincing her to select Fisk as a repository for many of Stieglitz's finest pieces.

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[11] John Hope Franklin interview with author, 5 June 1999.

[12] Jane Fort to author, March 19, 1999.

In choosing Fisk, O'Keeffe was adding to an already impressive collection. Early in the University's history, missionary teachers returning from Africa brought many works of art from that part of the world. These "ethnographic pieces from the Mende people" were the subject of an 1876 *Harper's Weekly* article.[13] Another important bequest was made in the 1930s by Samuel Insull, a Chicago businessman. This included hundreds of drawings by Cyrus Baldridge created for his book *White African and Black*. In 1943, Carl Van Vechten himself donated more than 400 of his portrait photographs of African Americans and entertainers of the 1920s and 30s. And, due to the influence of his protégé Aaron Douglas, Winold Reiss gave his "Portraits of Black Americans" collection to the campus.[14]

By choosing to send parts of Stieglitz's collection to Fisk, O'Keeffe was going against her deceased husband's wishes. He had wanted to bequeath the collection as a whole to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. O'Keeffe's decision to do otherwise may have stemmed from her experience teaching art in various parts of the South including Texas, South Carolina, and Virginia. She obviously felt it important to expose southern audiences to modern art and she wanted to do so in an institution that would serve both blacks and whites. That the Stieglitz bequest was truly unique was recognized by president Charles S. Johnson, who described it as "the most significant art collection of this character anywhere in this region."[15] Johnson made special arrangements to house the collection, converting a former gymnasium into a gallery, and

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[13] Kevin Grogan, former curator of the Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk, interview with author, March 5, 2001.

[14] Grogan, "Fisk University Galleries."

[15] Charles S. Johnson to Fisk alumni. 12 March 1949, Charles S. Johnson Papers, box 40, folder 4, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

arranging a lavish and "nationally significant opening of the exhibit."[16] O'Keeffe herself supervised the painting and lighting of the gallery. According to an alumni publication, "Students became acquainted with her, and many will recall with pride that they were privileged to have such close, personal contact with America's most outstanding woman painter, and a very warmhearted person."[17] The gallery would be named for Carl Van Vechten who was "a direct conduit to Georgia O'Keeffe."[18] The significance of the opening was conveyed by Van Vechten in a letter to his long-time friend Langston Hughes.[19]

The Role of Art at Fisk University

Georgia O'Keeffe was one of many luminaries invited to the campus during Johnson's presidency. According to students at the time, Johnson's "reputation drew many outstanding personages"— he used his ties to both Harlem Renaissance figures and leading philanthropists to bolster the educational program at Fisk.[20] Among the first of these was Aaron Douglas, "the artist most identified with the Harlem Renaissance."[21] Douglas was known for his treatments of subjects from black history and culture that used angular, silhouetted figures in a manner

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[16] Charles S. Johnson to Fisk alumni. 12 March 1949, Charles S. Johnson Papers, box 40, folder 4, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[17] Pearl Saunders, "Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery," March 1953, Charles S. Johnson Papers, Box 44, folder 6, Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville, Tennessee.

[18] Kevin Grogan, interview with author, 5 March 2001.

[19] Emily Bernard. (Ed.) *Remember Me to Harlem. The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

[20] Mary Thompson to author, 28 March 1998.

[21] Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson. *A History of African-American Artists. From 1972 to the Present.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993): 127.

reminiscent of Cubism and Greek vase painting. Douglas' illustrations for Alain Locke's book *The New Negro* in 1925 and for James Weldon Johnson's book of poems *God's Trombones* brought him to the attention of the Harlem Renaissance elites. He is perhaps most recognized for the murals he created during the 1920s and 30s on subjects such as the *Evolution of Negro Dance* and the *Negro in an African Setting*.[22] By drawing attention to black cultural achievements, Douglas used his work to revise assumptions about blacks that were inherent in much previous art.

Charles S. Johnson met Aaron Douglas in 1925. Johnson invited him to contribute illustrations to *Opportunity* magazine and introduced him to Winold Reiss—who would have a profound influence on Douglas' work. Johnson and Douglas continued their friendship and this led to Douglas' acceptance of a teaching position in the Fisk art department.[23] In 1944, Johnson secured monies from the Julius Rosenwald Fund to pay Douglass to paint murals in the Fisk library.[24] These murals, including *Building More Stately Mansions*, made connections between an African past and an industrial future. Later, Douglas would say of his longtime colleague and friend,

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[22] Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists.*

[23] Kevin Grogan, "Fisk University Galleries and Collections," in Powell and Reynolds. *To Conserve a Legacy*

[24] Aaron Douglas interviewed by Patrick J. Gilpin, 21 December 1970, Fisk Oral History Collection, located in vault, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

> Johnson was very, very helpful to me. I don't know what I would have done without him...His contribution in preparing young black people to take their place is a great contribution. He led the way.[25]

Douglas would remain at Fisk as chair of the art department until 1966.

Along with Aaron Douglas in visual arts, Johnson brought his literary friend Arna Bontemps to the campus. One of the best-known writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Bontemps taught in the English department and later assumed the position of University librarian. Like Douglas, Bontemps was the beneficiary of Johnson's promotional efforts, and was prominently featured in *Opportunity* as well. At Fisk, Bontemps shared his talent with students through poetry readings in the International Student Center and meaningful one-on-one interactions.[26] Significantly, Johnson made sure that faculty members like Bontemps and Douglas, who were in creative disciplines, had a relatively light teaching load—allowing them to continue their own work. Thus, Fisk was a place of nurturing for accomplished artists as well as students.

In addition to these well-known figures that became full-time faculty members, Johnson invited many of the day's political, artistic, and educational leaders to lecture on campus. These included poet Langston Hughes, sociologist Robert E. Park, and civil rights leaders Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Some of the most important cultural offerings at Fisk during the late 1940s and early 50s came through the International Student Center. Established under the previous president, Thomas Elsa Jones, the Center became a focal point under Johnson. Because of Johnson's international perspective, gained through service and research abroad, the Center was a natural

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[25] Aaron Douglas interviewed by Patrick J. Gilpin, 21 December 1970, Fisk Oral History Collection, located in vault, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[26] Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*.

place for him to focus his efforts to develop the Fisk curriculum. According to student body president Prince Rivers,

> [the] Fisk international center was the hub of the intellectual community. Through it, Fisk provided entertainment and education for all of Nashville. For example, we used to have a film series every Saturday and Sunday night and we'd play foreign films and the Nashville community was welcome.... Fisk was one of those places in Nashville where all people could get together and mingle without concern.[27]

International Student Center offerings also included readings of contemporary plays. Among those featured was Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author,* often cited by Post-Modern critics as a seminal work. Perhaps the most active part of the Center was its gallery, which played host to special exhibitions on campus. These exhibitions were broad in scope and ranged from Latin American prints to Modern photography to Dutch 17th Century painting.[28] The list of artists shown included such important Modernists as Man Ray, Irving Penn, and Lisette Model. With each exhibition, Aaron Douglas would give a gallery talk.[29]

But exposure to the arts was not limited to the International Student Center "crowd." At that time, the educational program included mandatory bi-weekly convocations that often

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[27] Prince Rivers, interview with author, 25 March 1999

[28] International Student Center Annual Report, 1955-56, authored by Orpha Schrag, Fiskiana Collection, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[29] Memorandum from Aaron Douglas to Charles S. Johnson, "Activities and Developments in the Department of Art Education During Past Year," box 44, folder 6, "Schedule for the Art Gallery, 1951-52," box 44, folder 2, Charles S. Johnson Papers, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

featured prominent literary and artistic figures.[30] In fact, Fisk alumna Jackie Sadler recalls, "There were required convocations and assigned seats. If your seat was empty, it was noted and you got so many absences. Absences could impact your grades."[31] Johnson often used the convocations to promote campus art offerings.[32] When a new exhibition was scheduled to open in the Van Vechten gallery or at the International Student Center, Johnson would be sure to announce it to the campus community. Throughout their undergraduate experience, Fisk made students aware of the prominent cultural offerings around them. Numerous students recalled the presence of the Douglas murals, the Stieglitz collection, and most of all the opportunities to meet face to face with cultural luminaries.[33] Peggy Alsup says of Fisk president Johnson,

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[30] The mandatory convocations were noted by Jane Fort (letter to author, 19 March 1998), Prince Rivers (interview with author, 25 March 1998), Gaylord Sprauve (email message to author, 1 March 2001), and Jackie Sadler (interview with author, 3 March 2001). The convocations are also noted in the Fisk University Bulletin (course catalog): "University Convocations, coming approximately every two weeks during the college year, provide opportunities for all students to hear officers or Faculty members of the University, distinguished visitors, or student leaders. Subjects of talks vary widely from architecture to politics and from poetry to vocational opportunities. Attendance is required of all students." Fisk University Bulletin, p. 80, 1951-56, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[31] Jackie Sadler to author, 3 March 2001.

[32] Carlton Adams, email message to author, 28 February 2001; Gaylord Sprauve, email message to author, 1 March 2001.

[33] Gaylord Sprauve, email message to author, 1 March 2001, Carole Hall Hardeman, email message to author, March 18, 2001, Carlton Adams, email message to author, 28 February 2001,

> I remember that just as he did in the Harlem Renaissance, he was always inclusive of everybody. He used to have dignitaries and famous people come to the campus and he would make sure that the students were there. I went to a dinner at the Heritage House [president's house] for Herbert Parker, the black actor, of course back in the early 1950's he was really something. I was intimidated by the whole thing but I just remembered being at this dinner with Johnson's gracious wife and Herbert Parker. For a kid who had not been anywhere this was just the most exciting thing in the world. There were a lot of students at that dinner.[34]

With the opening of the Stieglitz collection in 1949, Fisk acquired an enormously important asset that other universities in the South lacked. Efforts were made to publicize this fact and groups from all over the region were invited to visit the collections. According to a 1952 memo, the art gallery was kept in the public eye through "regular notices in the university student publications, city papers, bulletin boards in … the post office and International Student Center."[35] A 1954 letter from president Johnson to Georgia O'Keeffe herself notes that the Van Vechten Gallery was "carried in the City Directory as one of … ten outstanding points of interest for residents and visitors to the city."[36] And these publicity efforts paid off handsomely. Groups visited from area high schools, nearly every black college and teacher's college in the southern

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Peggy Alsup, interview with author, 31 March 1998, Jackie Sadler, interview with author, 3 March 2001, and Cornelia Edwards, email message to author, 28 January 2001.

[34] Peggy Alsup, interview with author, 31 March 1998.

[35] Pearl S. Creswell to Charles S. Johnson, 25 September 1952, Charles S. Johnson papers, box 44, folder 3, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[36] Charles S. Johnson to Georgia O'Keeffe, 18 June 1954, Charles S. Johnson papers, box 44, folder 4, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

region, and notably the art department of Vanderbilt University.[37] Both Fisk classes and those of nearby colleges and universities often required students to visit the Van Vechten gallery.[38] Clearly the gallery had an impact on the teaching of art in the South and was one of the most significant cultural venues in the area. But more importantly, the gallery and the various other cultural institutions at Fisk, including the International Student Center, became meeting points for blacks and whites within the then-segregated South. That this was an intentional part of the Fisk program is evident in a 1950 memo from the art department staff to Charles S. Johnson. Among the goals stated for the Carl Van Vechten gallery are:

> [to]... bring about better understanding among the people of Nashville by having student from all institutions and all interested citizens join together to make the gallery a living concern;
>
> [to]... further interest in modern art in Nashville by offering outstanding examples of wellknown [sic] artist's work as well as encouraging young local artists by exhibiting their work;
>
> [to]... put Fisk on the map as a dynamic center of modern art in the South.[39]

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[37] Report of the Use of the Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery and Stieglitz Collection, 1953-54, box 44, folder 7; Memorandum from Aaron Douglas to Charles S. Johnson, "Activities and Developments in the Department of Art Education during Past Year," box 44, folder 6, Charles S. Johnson papers, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[38] "Report of the Use of the Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery and Stieglitz Collection," Box 44, folder 7, Charles S. Johnson papers, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[39] Memorandum from Elizabeth Munsterberg to Charles S. Johnson, 7 August 1950, Art Department Recommendations for Long-Term Use of Collection, box 44, folder 1, Charles S. Johnson papers, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee. It is interesting to note that

The intent to promote integration through cultural exchange was recognized by students as an important part of the Fisk experience during the 1950s. Alumna Peggy Alsup best describes this:

> It was a time of strict segregation – we went downtown in groups and we knew where to go and where not to go.... There was not much interaction with the Nashville community. The most interaction came from the international center. There were students from other universities and other countries who would come to Fisk and we would have the opportunity to interact with and learn from them. It was interracial and international.[40]

Charles S. Johnson not only fostered racial integration but integration in the sense of breaking down barriers between disciplines. The promotion of visual arts was part of an overall pattern of curriculum integration. He and others at the University clearly recognized the value of exposing students to all forms of art whether or not it was part of their major field of study. According to Aaron Douglas,

> Until quite recently it has been the custom to discourage the participation of art in the processes of academic life. This was quite understandable in our society,

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President John Hope at Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia also attempted to break down racial barriers with art. He brought renowned African American artists Hale Woodruff to the campus in the 1930s to begin an art department. His hope was to draw attention to black art from the entire Atlanta area. Because Atlanta University's art collections lacked the drawing power of the Stieglitz collection, however, he was not as successful as Charles S. Johnson. (Michael Biezie, "Hale Woodruff, John Hope and the Establishment of the Art Department at Atlanta University," Southern History of Education Society Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, 2001).

[40] Peggy Alsup, interview with author, 31 March 1998.

> which took pride above all in its materialistic progress. We are now gradually realizing that material progress however rapid and wide spread does not itself lead to enduring civilization and the good life. We are confident that the grudging consideration now accorded the five arts in the educational program will, eventually give place to full and equal participation in every sense.[41]

Other faculty members, including Arna Bontemps, noted president Johnson's role in "popularizing] interdisciplinary studies."[42] Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Fisk, Oswald O. Schrag said of his experience teaching under Johnson's leadership, "Education for President Johnson was something more than obtaining information and knowledge. It was part of life, but also a preparation for the whole life."[43]

The holistic approach to education described by these faculty members has many similarities with current notions of integrated learning.[44] For example, a recent article by Cynthia A. Bickley-Green discusses the benefits of math and art integration. This article points to the

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[41] Memorandum from Aaron Douglas to Charles S. Johnson, "Activities and Developments in the Department of Art Education during Past Year." 30 March 1954, box 44, folder 6, Charles S. Johnson Papers, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[42] Aaron Douglas interview with Patrick J. Gilpin, 27 May 1971, Fisk Oral History Collection, located in Special Collections vault, Fisk University Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

[43] Oswald O. Schrag to author, 30 April 1998.

[44] Green, "Math and Art Curriculum Integration,". Jacobs. "The Integrated Curriculum," Leonard Lehrer, "Why the Visual Arts Must be in the School Curriculum," *The College Board Review*, n173, Fall 1994: 2-7, 30. Jacobs. "The Teacher as Designer," Jacobs. "The Interdisciplinary Concept Model."

advantages of viewing knowledge as a continuum that can be divided in many ways rather than a series of separate parts. Of the traditional division of the university into departments she says:

> They perceived the limits of knowledge as outlined by limits of their academic major. Knowledge had been cut up like a pre-sliced pizza. They were convinced that their piece of knowledge was different...They were ignoring [the fact] that the stuff of the world is the same for each student. What changes is the method of representing the knowledge ... The difference occurs in perception, interpretation and representation of the ubiquitous stuff [45]

Bickley-Green goes on to discuss the ways in which a richer curriculum can be crafted—one that uses concepts from math in the teaching of art and vice versa—in order to reach students with different learning styles.

President Johnson's holistic approach also mirrors that of the "involving college" – one that includes in a student's learning process both the classroom experience and the out-of-classroom experience. Kuh et al note that the "demarcation between activities undertaken in the classroom, laboratory, library, residence hall, or on-campus job that promote learning and personal development is not always clear..."[46] Under Johnson's presidency, there was a conscious effort to promote learning in all aspects of the student experience. As mentioned, students benefited from the regular convocations. On-campus social activities, particularly those at the International Student Center, were used as a way to introduce students to avant-garde film, theatre, and visual art. And whenever possible guest speakers were encouraged to mingle with

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[45] Green, "Math and Art Curriculum Integration," 10.

[46] George D. Kuh, John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J. Whitt and Associates. *Involving Colleges. Successful approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Development Outside the Classroom.* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1991):7.

students in casual settings such as small dinners and "fireside chats." In the words of Fisk alumna Carole Hall Hardeman,

> [My parents] sent me (and my three sisters) to Fisk because of its emphasis on cultural activities! Dr. Johnson was a very cultured gentleman who exuded class and elegance. Going to concerts, the art gallery, etc., was what a Fiskite did! [Dr. and Mrs. Johnson] were role models of persons who sincerely enjoyed and promoted the arts.[47]

For Johnson, however, curriculum integration was more than a way to nurture well-rounded students. By creating a cultural center at Fisk—an incubator for black scholarship and leadership—Johnson hoped to influence the political landscape in the South. Johnson's interest in the economic and political advancement of blacks and the improvement of race relations was established early in his career when he researched the causes of race riots in Chicago in the 1920s. His efforts to promote race relations through education bore fruit with the establishment of the Fisk Race Relations Institute in the 1940s. Perhaps the pinnacle of his work occurred during his presidency, when he was able to develop Fisk into a first-rate institution for black education within the oppressive atmosphere of segregation.

The success of Johnson's efforts is evident from the many distinguished graduates of the University from this period. Among them are historian and W.E.B. Du Bois biographer David Levering Lewis, former Clinton energy secretary Hazel O'Leary, United States Congressman John Lewis, poet Nicki Giovanni, and recently-exonerated activist Preston King. In addition to these well-known figures, the University produced many doctors, professors, lawyers, politicians, scientists, and civil rights leaders. The fact that so many Fisk students succeeded in so many different fields is testimony to the effectiveness of Johnson's approach—an approach

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[47] Carole Hall Hardeman, email to author, 18 March 200.1

which not only taught students the specific subject matter of their major but also built up their self-esteem and sense of pride in their heritage. He made an effort to build students up, according to alumna Peggy Alsup, "in terms of their strength and identity."[48]

Conclusion

During the years after Charles S. Johnson's presidency, the Fisk art collection went through periods of neglect. Curator Kevin Grogan, who directed the Van Vechten Gallery during the 1990s, noted that at times the building had been "a bit of a derelict." And, for a period of approximately ten years O'Keeffe took back the Stieglitz collection; it was not returned until 1983, when renovations were completed on the gallery.[49] But during the time that the gallery saw the most use, in the early 1950s, it took on significance greater than the physical space and the works in it. The Fisk collections, and the university surrounding them, were able to realize O'Keeffe's original goal: "...through showing that there are many ways, give some one confidence in his own way..."[50] Because the work in the collection was still considered "radical" by many at the time, it became a point of attraction for an international array of visitors and educators. The fact that students from all fields were encouraged and often required to participate in gallery events and arts-related convocations, helped them to discover their own role in culture. Johnson's integrated approach to learning produced a cadre of leaders who are able to make connections between disciplines and have a broad vision of how the world operates. As evidenced by their comments, students had a sense of excitement in the moment and long-term pride in having experienced a learning environment that included such esteemed personages.

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[48] Pebby Alsup interview with author, 31 March 1998.

[49] Kevin Grogan interview with author, 5 March 2001.

[50] Georgia O'Keeffe quoted in Powell and Reynolds. *To Conserve a Legacy*: 128.

They gained a sense of their place in the world at large rather than merely as blacks living in the segregated South.

At the same time that the collections were causing blacks to move out of the bounds of the southern mindset, they were inviting whites to move in to the black world. The fact that so many different groups visited the Fisk collections meant that Georgia O'Keeffe's goal of making art accessible to all was realized. More importantly, the fact that Vanderbilt students and faculty had to "cross the tracks" and visit the Fisk University gallery in order to experience the avant-garde supported Johnson's goal of using the arts as a "soft spot in the armor of the nation." That whites and blacks came together peacefully for artistic and cultural events at Fisk was a blow to the idea that segregation was a necessary part of southern life.

The success of Fisk's cultural programs shows the unique role of black college art collections in American society. These collections house a treasure-trove of art and include many of the best examples of African American painting, sculpture, and graphic works. With their focus on the accomplishments of black artists, they have great potential to build a sense of identity in the younger generation of African Americans. Moreover, the black college art gallery is a place where connections are made between cultures. Just as the Van Vechten gallery at Fisk was one of the few places were southern blacks could learn about the latest developments in the avant-garde, current uses of black college art collections are also aiming to include black audiences in the art world. For example, the Conserve a Legacy Exhibition, which has been traveling the country for several years, combines the collections of Fisk, Hampton, Clark-Atlanta, North Carolina Central, and Tuskegee Universities. Concurrent with appearances at major museums, parts of the collection are shown at black college galleries and other institutions located within the black community. Thus, the collections are being used to expose whites to the

accomplishments of blacks. As in Charles S. Johnson's time, art is being used to break down barriers between the races.